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Hearts

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“HEARTS”

By Rachel R. Mantos

In elementary school, our seating charts were done every year in alphabetical order, meaning Angela and I always got to sit next to each other. At least until the teacher got to learn our names and personalities, at which point we were typically separated because we spent far more time talking than completing our work. Of course, Angela was always the one forced to switch seats as she was the chatterbox, and I was too shy to cause any trouble without her influence.

The first time it happened was in third grade, the same year Angela moved here. It was the second week of school and we were supposed to be learning cursive, but at some point, Angela got distracted and started doodling hearts all over her paper instead of practicing her letters. I glanced at her paper to see if I was making my capital G's correctly, only to see that she had quit halfway through her line of B's.

“What are you doing? We're supposed to be practicing cursive,” I said.

“Yeah, well, I'd rather practice drawing my hearts instead. I can never get them even,” she said, furrowing her brow and poking her tongue out slightly.

“I think they look really pretty,” I said.

“Thanks,” Angela beamed at me. I couldn't explain it at the time, but I felt an unfamiliar feeling stirring in my tummy.

“Angela. Arianna.” I swiveled my head around to see Ms. Taylor standing beside our table. My eyes widened like a deer caught in headlights, and I scurried to resume tracing my

letters. The gentle warning was enough to resume my focus, but Angela acted as if she hadn't even heard it. "Angela, those are very pretty hearts, but I need you to get back to working on your cursive, okay?"

Angela sighed. "Fine," she said, reluctantly returning to the assignment as well.

Satisfied, Ms. Taylor walked away to check on the students at another table. As soon as she was out of earshot, Angela whispered to me, "I wish I could spend all day just drawing. This stuff is so boring."

I glanced at Ms. Taylor across the room to check that she was occupied before replying. She was bending down at Jimmy McCormick's desk, probably showing him the right way to make his letters. "Yeah, I wish I could just be reading my book."

"What book are you reading?" Angela sat down her pencil and turned her focus entirely to me.

"Beezus and Ramona."

"I love that book. I've read all the Ramona books."

"Me too. I'm rereading this one right now because my mom can't take me to the library until the weekend."

"We should go to the library together. I wanna get one of those books that teaches you how to draw stuff. Like people. I'm really bad at drawing people."

"Girls," Ms. Taylor said, more sternly this time. Angela and I looked up to see Ms. Taylor had returned to our table. I guess we had stopped whispering at some point because the whole class was silent, watching to see if we were about to get in trouble. "Do I need to separate

you two?” We shook our heads. Ms. Taylor pursed her lips. “If I have to speak to you about this one more time then I’ll have no other choice. Please get back to work. Quietly,” she said, emphasizing the last word.

We stayed quiet the remainder of the lesson, but inevitably Angela got bored again later in the day and started up another conversation with me. Despite my fear of being punished and my reputation for being the “good student,” I couldn’t help myself but to converse with her.

“What’s your favorite color?” Angela said.

“Blue.”

“I like pink.”

“Mine used to be pink but I changed it.”

“You should change it back, then we can have the same favorite color.”

“Girls, I warned you what would happen if I caught you talking again,” Ms. Taylor said. For the third time that day I was startled by her cat-like stealth. Though looking back maybe Ms. Taylor wasn’t the master of surprise that I thought she was, and I was just more concerned with someone else.

After that I had to spend the rest of the year sitting next to Jimmy, which was a major downgrade considering he smelt like tuna fish and ate his own boogers. But on the bright side, when I came home from school that day, Mom said it was okay for Angela to come with us to the library that weekend, and from that point on we were best friends.

When we were in seventh grade Angela developed a habit of drawing on her arms, much to the chagrin of her teachers and parents, who constantly told her she would get ink poisoning.

When I asked her about it, she said it was so she wouldn't forget stuff. This made sense for things like *get mom to sign permission slip*, but not so much for the time she drew a whole dinosaur on her right forearm.

That was the same year I found a heart-shaped valentine in my locker. It didn't have many words on it, but there was a beautiful drawing of two hands intertwined. It was anonymous, so at lunchtime Angela marched me around the whole cafeteria to interrogate random boys over who put it there. They all denied it, and some even laughed at us, which did wonders for my self-esteem, but at the end of the day Jimmy came up to me and confessed that it was from him. I was pretty sure he didn't eat his own boogers anymore, but his signature tuna smell had been replaced by body odor and axe body spray, and honestly if given the choice, I'd prefer the tuna.

"Well, what did you say when he told you?" Angela asked me on the bus ride home.

"I just said thanks and ran away," I said.

Angela laughed. When she did so, the corners of her eyes crinkled up and her lips pulled back to reveal her top row of teeth. Even though she was laughing at me, I couldn't help but laugh along. It was completely different from when the boys laughed at me in the cafeteria. When they did it, I felt ashamed of myself and wanted to hide away until it was over. But when it was Angela. When it was Angela it felt different. Her laugh was like a melody, it made me feel warm like I had been sitting in the sunshine on the first day of spring. I would do anything to keep hearing her laugh.

"You should've kissed him," Angela said when she finally stopped laughing.

"Ew!" I scrunched up my nose in disgust.

“What? He could be your boyfriend. Wouldn’t that be so cool? You’re gonna be the first one of us to have a boyfriend.”

“I don’t want Jimmy to be my boyfriend.”

“Well, who do you want to be your boyfriend?” Angela looked at me expectantly, her topaz eyes burning into mine like they shared the secrets of the universe. For this first time in our four years of friendship I didn’t know what to say to her. I had never thought about having a boyfriend before. I figured I wouldn’t have to worry about that until I met a guy I wanted to date, and so far, that hadn’t happened yet. Angela was waiting for me to answer, but for some reason the truth didn’t feel good enough.

“Um, maybe Mike Wallace,” I said, remembering the day before when I had overheard a group of girls talking about how he was the cutest boy in our grade.

“What, no, Mike is gonna be my boyfriend,” Angela said. My heart dropped to the pit of my stomach, but this didn’t make sense to me, considering I had only decided to like Mike five seconds ago.

“Since when do you like Mike?” I said slowly.

Angela said nothing, but instead rummaged through her backpack looking for a pen and began doodling hearts on her arm.

Unsure of what to do, I glanced down at my lap and picked at a hangnail on my index finger. The pit in my stomach only grew larger the longer the tension hung in the air between us.

“You can date Mike. I don’t really care,” I said, attempting to appease Angela. I thought that I meant it, but when I said it out loud it felt like a lie. The truth was I did care, even though I

couldn't explain why. All I knew was I wanted Angela's attention. She had never given me the silent treatment before and I couldn't stand it. I didn't want to talk about boys anymore. I desperately wanted to hear her laugh again.

"No. It's fine. You can have him," she said quietly, still not looking at me. "Besides, I think I like somebody else anyway."

I blinked at her, not knowing why, but feeling like I had just been punched in the gut. First Angela liked Mike, now she likes somebody else? Why hadn't she told me about any of this?

"Who?" I asked.

Angela's hand faltered momentarily. She took in a sharp breath before glancing out the window and putting her pen away. The bus was about to pull onto her street. She flashed me a small smile, but it wasn't like before. It didn't meet her eyes and her lips stayed closed. "Nobody. It doesn't matter. I'll see you tomorrow."

I said goodbye as she got up and stepped off the bus. I was still so confused by the whole interaction, and I replayed it over and over again in my head for the rest of the night. When I saw Angela again the next morning, she said no word of our last conversation. I decided it was best not to bring it up either.

During the summer before tenth grade I went on my first date. It was a double date with Angela, which was the only reason I agreed to it. By this point in time I had discovered the reason I was never interested in dating boys, but I kept it to myself out of fear of being rejected by the one person I was truly head over heels for.

The date was fairly lowkey, a simple afternoon at the beach with Mike and Jimmy. We found a spot far enough away from everyone else to lay out our picnic blanket and set down the cooler with our waters and sandwiches inside. I slipped off my flipflops and sat down, opting to keep my T-shirt and shorts on for the time being. Jimmy pulled off his own T-shirt and plopped down next to me. Thankfully, Jimmy smelt a lot better these days, now that he had figured out girls preferred more subtle cologne than axe, but I was still annoyed by the feeling of his leg pressed up against mine. I shifted slightly until we were no longer touching.

Unlike me, Angela chose to take off her cover up immediately, revealing the new bikini she bought last month. It was white with pink hearts scattered across it. I averted my eyes, paranoid that she might think I was staring and piece together why. Unfortunately, in doing this, I caught sight of Mike openly ogling her body. It filled me with rage. Clearly, he was only interested in her body. He didn't care about how smart, or kind Angela was. He didn't care that she was a talented artist. He didn't care that she was unwaveringly loyal and would give the shirt off her back if it helped someone she loved. To him she was just a pretty girl in a swimsuit, and for that he would never deserve her.

The four of us lounged on the blanket for a while. The boys were trying to impress us by doing bad imitations of something their field hockey coach said the other day. I wasn't paying attention. I kept my eyes trained on Angela, watching her reactions. She was listening to the boys intently, nodding and adding commentary when appropriate. I reveled in it when she rolled her eyes at their stupidity and it killed me when she laughed along with them.

I knew I had no shot with her. She had liked Mike since the seventh grade and was over the moon when he finally asked her out. The only reason I was here was because Angela was

nervous to go on her first date alone, and since Jimmy had always had a thing for me, so it was easy to convince him to be my date and tag along with Angela and Mike.

“You guys wanna go swim?” Jimmy asked eventually. I didn’t, but Angela seemed excited by this suggestion, so I shed my street clothes, leaving me only in my blue one-piece suit, and followed them down to the water.

The boys waded straight into the water until it reached their knees, but Angela and I hung back to let our bodies get used to the temperature. Despite it being mid-August, the ocean felt as cold the water bottles sitting in the ice cooler.

“Thanks for coming along with me,” Angela said.

“Anything for you,” I said. I truly meant it. I knew I would do anything to see her happy, even when it caused me so much pain. “I’m surprised you wanted me to come though. It’s not like you to be nervous.”

“Well, I just wanted my first date to be special.”

“And how exactly does that work with me here?”

“Because you’re my best friend.” She looked at me earnestly. “Everything’s better with you around.”

I was at a loss for words. I looked away and reminded myself for about the thousandth time that our relationship was purely platonic. Usually I was good about not getting my hopes up, but when we shared little moments like this, where Angela revealed how much I mean to her, it made it a whole lot more difficult.

Eventually we made our way over to where the boys were, now waist-deep in the water. I noticed how the boys maneuvered themselves in between us so they could talk to us separately. If Angela noticed too, then she didn't seem to mind. Jimmy told me some story about how while working as a camp counselor earlier in the summer he burned a bag of popcorn so bad it set off all the smoke detectors in the dining hall. I listened half-heartedly to be polite, but the majority of my attention was focused on Mike and Angela. They were just far enough away where I couldn't eavesdrop on their conversation, but I did see them giggling nonstop as they began to splash each other playfully.

Jimmy must have noticed me watching them at some point because the next thing I knew he splashed a huge wave directly in my face.

"Ugh!" I shouted as the water got in my eyes and up my nose. I spluttered and coughed from the saltwater entering my lungs. I brought my hands up to wipe my eyes, but considering they had previously been underwater, it didn't help much.

"Shit, I'm sorry," Jimmy said. He put his hand on my back as a comforting gesture, but it only made me angrier at him.

"Leave me alone," I said. I managed to squint my eyes open and turned myself around to head back in the direction of land. It wasn't until I made it back to the picnic blanket and dried my face with my towel that I realized Angela had followed me.

"Hey, are you okay?" she asked when she caught up with me. The boys were right behind her.

"No, I'm not," I said curtly.

“Hey, Arianna, like I said, I’m really sorry. I was just trying to have some fun,” Jimmy said apologetically. I glared at him briefly, but I could see in his eyes that he truly was sorry.

“It’s fine,” I sighed. “I think I’m done with the beach for today though.”

“No worries,” Mike said, flashing me his lopsided smile. “Why don’t you let Jimmy take you home while Angela and I stay here and chill?” I hated this idea almost as much as I hated Mike. The last thing I wanted right now was to be alone with Jimmy, but my blood really boiled at the thought of this guy taking Angela away from me.

“If Arianna wants to leave then I’m leaving too,” Angela said. My heart fluttered in the way I had become so familiar with over the years when Angela stood up for me. It was reassuring to know that Angela still wanted to be with me over her date. I would have stuck my tongue out at Mike in childish celebration of this small victory if I didn’t have to keep pretending to tolerate him for Angela’s sake.

The boys shrugged in disappointment, but wordlessly packed up our stuff. Angela and I put our clothes back on and follow the boys up the beach and back to the car. Mike held open the passenger door for Angela, but she opted instead to climb into the backseat with me. 2-me, 0-Mike.

The boys were uncharacteristically silent as they drove us both back to my house. Jimmy apologized for splashing me yet again as we stepped out of the car. I forgave him. I was way less upset about it now that it had given me the opportunity to end the first date from hell and be alone with Angela again.

Once we had showered and changed into pajamas, we made snacks and settled onto my bed to watch a movie. Angela sat particularly close to me, which wasn’t out of the ordinary, but

I could feel her arm pressed against mine from shoulder to elbow. Unlike with Jimmy earlier, feeling Angela's skin against my own was electrifying. I only wished that I could feel more of her. That I could hold her hand, or rest my head on her shoulder, or completely entangle my limbs with her own. Instead I kept my head facing straight forward and glued my eyes to the TV screen. If I could focus on the movie maybe I would forget that the girl of my dreams was sitting next to me on my bed.

"What are you thinking about?" Angela asked suddenly. Caught off guard, I knew I couldn't tell her the truth, so I scrambled to say the first thing that came to mind.

"Just how dumb boys are," I said. Angela chuckled.

"The dumbest," she said. "To be honest, I've had the most fun today when it was just me and you."

There she goes again, saying things that were totally innocuous to her, but forced me to remind myself that our relationship was strictly platonic. "Yeah, me too."

"You know, I'm not really sure why I agreed to go on this date with Mike in the first place," she said.

"Don't you like him though?" I asked.

"Yeah." Angela paused. "Well, I don't know. I thought I did. I mean he's cute. But I didn't feel any sparks. I always imagined that when I went on my first date, it would be super romantic, and I'd be able to feel the chemistry between us. But I didn't feel like that at all with Mike."

"Maybe that's because you invited two extra people on your date," I joked.

“No, I don’t think so. I just don’t think Mike is the one.”

“Don’t worry. You’ll find the one eventually.”

“Maybe I already have.”

I turned my head toward Angela. She was already facing me. Her face was mere inches away from mine. My heart beat even faster than before, and I was scared she could hear it. I swallowed the lump forming in my throat and tried to steady my breathing. Her eyes burned into mine. It was terrifying but I couldn’t bear to break her gaze. I barely registered that she hadn’t said anything for a minute; I was too concentrated on trying not to ruin our friendship by closing the distance between our lips.

When I didn’t say anything, she continued. “Ever since we were little kids, you’ve always been my favorite person. The one I want to talk to more than anybody else. Even when it did nothing but get us into trouble. You’re always there for me, and you get me in a way no one else does.” She paused, and I could see she was trying to choose her next words very carefully. “You remember that valentine Jimmy gave you in seventh grade?”

“What about it?”

“Well, it wasn’t actually from him.”

“What do you mean?” Angela turned her head away from me again, but I was able to catch the faintest blush appear on her cheeks.

“I mean, Jimmy wasn’t the one who gave it to you.”

“How do you know?”

Angela bit her lip. She furrowed her brow and glanced at me briefly before looking away again. “Because I’m the one who did.”

No way. There was no way Angela just said that. Angela was just my best friend and nothing more. She’s never given any sign before that she liked me back.

Except. The valentine did have a drawing on it, and there was no one I knew who could draw like that. Jimmy certainly couldn’t. And she did invite me to tag along on her first date even though she made such a big deal about wanting it to be special. I was at a loss for words. Is it really possible? All this time, could Angela have felt the same way I did?

“I put it in your locker because I wanted to see how you’d react. It was silly, to think you’d know it was from me since I didn’t sign it, and when you told me about it I chickened out and pretended I didn’t know anything about it.”

This was it. This was the moment. I had to tell her. But for some reason I remained frozen. After all the time I spent shoving my feelings down and telling myself there was never any chance, here she was suddenly confessing feelings of her own to me. Everything was happening so fast I could barely process it all.

“I’m sorry if I just made things weird,” Angela rushed to say. “I’m sure you don’t even feel the same way, and you probably think I’m totally weird or creepy now, and I get if you don’t wanna be friends with me anymore.”

Throughout our whole friendship, Angela had always been the confident, bold, self-assured one, while I was quiet, shy, and insecure. But in this moment our roles were shifting. I had never seen Angela so nervous. It sparked something in me to take action. An action I never thought I would take.

I cut Angela off from her rambling by cupping her chin in my hand and pulling her face close to me. I leaned in, and in a split second of hesitation, looked into her eyes. I saw fear, but also excitement, and I knew. There was no doubt that we felt the same thing. I shut my eyes and leaned in, gently pressing my lips to hers. She immediately responded by moving her lips against mine. Time stopped, and suddenly there was nothing but her and me.

The kiss didn't last longer than a few seconds, but within it held a lifetime of yearning.

"It's you," I said softly. "It's always been you."

We talked for a while more about our feelings and where our relationship would go from here (in between a few more kisses), before cuddling into one another and finishing the movie. I put my arm around her as she rested her head on my chest, our hands intertwined. I barely watched the movie, my mind filled to the brink with thoughts about how lucky I was to finally be able to hold the girl I love and tell her how much I she means to me. At some point I began to doze off, the last thing I consciously remember being the feeling of Angela tracing small hearts onto the palm of my hand.

The heart of this piece comes from two sections. The first is “That was the same year I found a heart-shaped valentine in my locker. It didn’t have many words on it, but there was a beautiful drawing of two hands intertwined.” The second is “At some point I began to doze off, the last thing I consciously remember being the feeling of Angela tracing small hearts onto the palm of my hand.” These two pieces put together both involve hearts, which I use throughout the story as symbolism for Angela. The first part is a hint that Angela is the one who put the valentine in Arianna’s locker, even though she doesn’t know that yet, revealing to the reader that her feelings are reciprocated. The second part is after the two girls have finally gotten together, and represents the love between them that they are finally able to express.